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ABSTRACT

Reading instructors have valuable expertise to share with writing instructors to improve the writing ability of students. Writing instructors often give reading assignments to provide topics for students' essays or discussion, without understanding the reading process. A reading teacher can (1) show the writing instructor how to determine the conceptual load and readability level of the assigned readings, (2) help the writing instructor form questions to aid in comprehension, (3) show writing instructors how to teach students to react critically to ideas, (4) encourage writing instructors to have students read each others' papers and look for some of the same qualities in their own papers, and (5) provide well-written essays that can serve as models for student writing. The reading teacher's skills can also be of assistance when students write research papers. Writing can strengthen the reading process as well: reinforced and consistent emphasis in writing papers with thesis statements should help students in finding the thesis statements in future reading. (HTH)

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READING STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE WRITING INSTRUCTION

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READING STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE WRITING INSTRUCTION

When I completed my Master's degree in Reading, I expected to spend most of my time working with students trying to improve their reading skills. I anticipated working with Susan on her word-attack skills, trying to improve Bob's ability to find topic sentences and showing Jesse speed-reading techniques. Little did I know when I began my third year teaching Developmental Reading that a different opportunity of teaching students would lie before me. During fall registration, our college experienced a lower enrollment in our reading courses and a much higher enrollment in our freshman writing courses than expected. In fact, some writing classes had as many as sixty students. My academic background in language arts courses and classroom experiences with students' written reactions to articles they had read led me to believe there was a close connection between reading and writing skills. Since I was anxious to put some of my ideas into practice and to make sure I wasn't considered unnecessary to the Dean, I offered to teach a section of Written Communication I and was thrilled when the English department graciously accepted my offer! I am teaching another section of writing this spring and am scheduled for one next fall. I have found the classroom experience immensely rewarding intellectually, professionally, and personally.

My experience in teaching writing has strengthened my conviction that reading instructors have valuable expertise to share with writing instructors to improve the writing ability of their students.

Furthermore, my understanding of the challenges and difficulties teachers face in trying to improve the writing process of students has increased. In other words, I have learned that teaching students to write is hard work! Moreover, my experience with students learning to write will be invaluable as I begin my new assignment next fall as Director of our college's Learning Center.

Although research has failed to give any conclusive evidence that using any reading technique in writing classes is effective in producing better writers, one possible reason for this lack of definitive hard data might be that writing teachers don't understand much about the skills involved in the reading process. Most writing instructors "teach" reading in a haphazard, unstructured manner if they ever teach it or address it at all. Many classes use Readers that provide subjects for students' essays and/or class discussion. The writing instructor simply assigns the article or essay to be read. The topics included in these Readers usually provide provocative material that may be the subject of a hoped-for lively discussion. Then students are expected to write a reaction or essay on the topic. Any "reading" instruction is probably accidental, depending upon the apparatus of the selected Reader. Although many of these Readers are beginning to include preview questions, vocabulary words, and other meaningful reading aids, these are frequently ignored or overlooked. Thus, little reading instruction results, if any. Consequently, reading teachers can use their expertise to make this writing process more effective.

While it's true that students learn best to read by practicing the skills needed, there are better ways to assign reading in the writing class than simply telling students to read an essay.

Realizing that many of our underprepared students have poor reading skills, we must give them material that they can read. A reading instructor can show the writing instructor how to determine the conceptual load and the readability level of various essays and excerpts in Readers or texts. He* can help the writing instructor understand the reasons why the material needs to be on the instructional or independent reading level of the students by asking questions such as, what good does it do to have students read an article on the danger of alcohol abuse when it is much too difficult for them to comprehend? If students don't understand many of the terms used, how can they be reasonably expected to write essays of much worth or value on it?

In order to facilitate the comprehension of the article, the reading teacher can help the writing instructor formulate questions about the article beyond those listed in the text, if any are provided. These questions should probably include those on the literal, interpretive, and applied levels or reflect any taxonomy of cognition and learning like Bloom's.

Furthermore, the reading instructor can familiarize the writing teacher with a variety of reading techniques, such as SQ3R or PQRST, to help the students pre-read the material to discover the subject and the author's approach. The reading teacher also needs to show the writing instructor how to help students identify the author's

*The pronoun "he" will be used in the remainder of this paper in a generic sense to avoid the awkwardness of including the he/she combination.

main point. In fact, I recommend that reading and writing teachers use the same terms as much as possible, i.e. topic, main point, supporting details, etc. in the instruction to help students realize that "reading and writing in some ways are mirror images of each other." (Estes and Vaughn, p. 163).

As the writing teacher exposes students to more reading material, he needs to teach them to react critically to the written ideas on the page. The reading teacher can show the writing teacher how to help students look more closely at the essay to see if the author supports his point. By encouraging students to do close, careful reading, they will be able to look for complete definitions of terms, adequate statistics, relevant examples, or interesting anecdotes. As students become more conscious of such features in the reading they encounter, it is hoped that they will be more conscious of needing a central idea and sufficient supporting material in their writing.

Reading instructors can encourage writing instructors to have students read each others' papers and look for these same qualities in their papers. Every writer needs to observe himself as a reader. The communication process demands that the reader and writer interact. Most of my students enjoy sharing their writing. In fact, the students I have worked with are quite perceptive in their comments to each other about what each paper needs to become more clear. In sharing ideas with peers in written form, teachers hope that these students will begin to realize that "errors are unintentional and unprofitable intrusions upon the consciousness of the reading. . .they demand energy without giving any return in meaning; they shift the reader's attention from where he is going

(meaning) to how he is getting there (code)." (Shaunessy, p. 12).

All writers need to analyze their audiences. They usually establish purposes as to what they want to accomplish whether it be to amuse, surprise or inform. In light of these goals, they direct their writing to the specific reading audience to achieve the desired communication or transmission and reception of ideas. An awareness of a reading audience is essential in revision. The audience normally demands the writer be specific in his meaning. Reading skills are essential for the writer in revision because "no one can write better than he can read his own text." (Heisch, p. 168). Encouraging students to read their own papers out loud helps them determine if they "sound right." An abundance of teacher and peer questions and feedback help them evaluate their ideas and make judgments about what they are trying to communicate. Students who haven't read enough probably will be able to neither hear their own mistakes nor compare their writing to others. When writers begin to observe themselves as the readers, they start to understand the characteristics of good writing--relevant ideas expressed in a clear, effective manner.

Reading teachers can help make the reading included in the writing class more relevant to students in another way. If a criterion for passing the writing class is to write an essay, then the writing teacher should provide well-written student and professional essays that can serve as models for the students' writing. When using these model essays in class, the reading teacher can help the writing teacher show students how to recognize writing

patterns of comparison and contrast, cause and effect, or simple listing. These factors will demonstrate that careful reading and clear writing are components of the same logical thinking process.

As writing students who read well become more proficient in their writing skills, they will likely be expected to write research papers. The reading teacher's skills can also be of assistance in this learning experience. He can offer his expertise to the writing teacher to help the students learn how to skim tables of contents, indexes and charts in determining the relevance of various sources. When the student has to read two or more books on the same subject, he will need to know how to define the issues and analyze different points of view. He must also be able to differentiate between facts and opinions of the author. Examining the writer's background will give students insights into the author's purpose. Reading strategies can help students evaluate the usefulness of the information in relation to the topic of the research paper. Not only do the students need to assess the source material, but they also need to focus on the author's main point and integrate it in his paper. Accurate reading of sources should help students arrive at correct conclusions. Thus, by addressing reading skills, writing teachers can help students produce more carefully researched and more thoughtfully considered writing projects.

The writing process is an idea-clarifying process and a learning process. Writing improves the ability to synthesize and analyze written material and, therefore, strengthens the reading process as well. Reinforced and consistent emphasis in writing papers with thesis statements should help students find them in their reading.

My experience in writing classes has confirmed my opinion that expecting students to write summaries of their reading should be an essential part of every reading course. Some reading teachers even include other writing activities, e.g. writing autobiographies that teach reasoning and sequential skills (Wallinger, p. 364) and writing annotations in the REAP approach (Eanet and Manzo, pp. 646-52). Research has shown that sentence combining, a process whereby students reorder sentences into a unified structure, can help students simplify the process of identifying topic sentences. In this case, activities designed for writing also improve reading. In fact, research suggests that reading programs which include writing components are more successful (Shanahan, p. 359).

Since college level reading demands careful, analytical thinking, reading instructors need to use every possibility to help students become critical readers. In attempting to analyze the meaning of the written word, students need to have languaging skills at their disposal. Faculty judge students' abilities by skills they demonstrate in both reading and writing, yet most content area instructors know little about either reading or writing processes. There is a definite need for both reading and writing instructors to become involved within those classes either through mini-sessions within the course or time spent with the instructor to show him how to help students deal with the written language which surrounds them in their curriculum. Another benefit reading instructors can reap from becoming more involved in writing is that such knowledge and experience will make their credentials as

professionals much more marketable in a society which places so much emphasis on the written word.

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